

Chapter Nine

Kuan Yin

The cap of her pen was already ruined. She vigorously chewed on it as she tapped her foot to the beat of Bowie's *Queen Bitch* blaring through the wireless speaker on her desk. Although the volume was already too loud for an office setting, she turned it up when she heard the opening riff. As she feverishly entered the data into her report program she tapped her foot to the beat. The world was in sync now. She even looked down at her pawing kitty figurine who seemed to keep time like a perfect metronome. She was definitely in the groove and making good progress.

Despite the fact that she was already chewing on a pen, she reached up and grabbed one of the three pencils stuck in the bun affixed on the top of her head. Her pace was furious now, but it was brought a screeching halt with a gentle rap on her office doorframe.

"Aiya, diu lei! Daa si lei!" She screamed as she reeled around violently in her swiveling chair to see her colleague Huan Liu quivering in the doorway.

Huan stammered, "I'm so sorry to interrupt Daiyu, but Dr. Hsui sent me to get you. He said the investor was arriving and we were meant to be on the roof five minutes ago and he said..."

Daiyu raised her right finger to silence him and then whipped around to return to her work, but the thought in her head escaped and the momentum was ruined. She clenched both fists trying to calm herself. She then reached into the cup for one of her breaking pencils (a few ruined dresses and lab coats from snapped ball point pens conveyed that lesson to her), snapped it, and threw it across the room. She then whirled back around, stood up quickly, stomped across the office, and tossed on her lab coat.

Intending to fuck with Huan for just a little bit more to salve her wounded mojo, she stopped and glared at him behind the bright red frames of her glasses. As he cowered, she dropped the glare and replaced it with the biggest smile she could muster, mouthed a quick air kiss, and patted him firmly on the cheek as she trudged down the hallway.

Daiyu knew he was madly in love with her, but she found him as appealing as a harelipped mule. She thought her sisterly bullying would eventually drive her discomfort home to him, but it had the opposite effect. Every bit of attention, negative as it may be, seemed to attract him more. Even her absentmindedness was entralling to Huan. As she walked down the hall, he noticed the run in her black tights on the back of her calf that developed as she snagged it on the edge of her chair in her dramatic exit. As she arrhythmically tromped down the hall in her clunky thick-heeled black shoes, Huan practically swooned.

As Daiyu walked down the long hallway, she took advantage of the glass walls of each office cell. If any of the researchers were in their cells, they were miserable. Office time meant they were out of their labs and doing the drudge work of science; reports, papers, and the like, the necessary evils which enabled them to actually conduct research. As she passed,

her friends got a bird. Good friends got double birds. People she did not care for got a smile and a wave. Assholes got a vigorous wave.

The choice greeting was saved for the office at the end of the hallway. Daiyu slackened her pace and slowly approached like a lioness stalking her prey on the Serengeti. Creeping up the side of the outer office wall, she suddenly sprang up banging the glass loudly. The prim figure inside the perfectly organized office with her back to the door started with surprise but did not turn around.

Daiyu then opened her mouth wide and pressed her lips on the glass as she inflated her cheeks. The woman in the office gave a heavy sigh and swiveled around slowly in her chair. Her dark hair was fixed neatly in a conservative bun. As she rose, her pencil skirt and satin blouse perfectly accentuated her long slender frame. She removed her reading glasses and placed them on the glass top of her desk before walking to the door. The glasses were one of the few outward signs of her age. Despite being firmly in her fifties, Eppie Li showed no signs of grey in her hair and very few wrinkles on her elegant face.

She took her time deliberately testing the limits of Daiyu's lung capacity. It worked and Daiyu started licking the glass as her lungs finally gave out. Next to the door sat a short credenza. As she made her way to the door, Eppie retrieved a small black case from the corner. She gave Daiyu a reproachful look as her protégé looked up at her with a smile through her red nose and watery eyes. She then took a glass cleaning wipe out of the case and began to remove the saliva marks from the outside of her window.

"Must you do that every day?" she asked.

"Come on, Eppie! You can't tell me you weren't impressed. That has to be a record," Daiyu replied.

Eppie merely raised her eyebrow as she closed the case and returned it to its spot on the credenza. In truth, Daiyu was a breath of fresh air in the overly formal egregiously male dominated office. It was proper for a woman her age to at least give token disapproval to a former student with a gregarious personality like Daiyu, but secretly she resented the role.

Daiyu was like this at university. Of course, the men there looked at every woman in the class as if they were absurd and Daiyu was merely the peak of what they assumed all women seeking advanced degrees were like inside. But the women were truly cruel to Daiyu. She had a few other outcast friends, but she was constantly suffering the barbs of her classmates. Her brilliance made the situation worse. Daiyu had an analytical mind like a computer and she remembered all the data she was exposed to with exact precision.

However, more impressive than her rote memory was her creativeness. Mechanical engineering was really a hobby to her, but genetics was the field that inspired her and she seemed to take to it effortlessly. Eppie took her under her wing and served as her thesis advisor. She was not that far removed from her own dissertation and, though they would not admit it, no other students wanted her, but Daiyu enthusiastically accepted the tutelage.

Daiyu was now a decade removed from graduate school and in that time the techniques she pioneered were producing remarkable results. Her profitability is why her presence was

suffered and indeed commanded at this meeting with a big shot Western venture capitalist. Of course, she knew from experience to keep silent and pretend that Dr. Hsui, the project manager, was the innovator. Dr. Hsui's grandfather had some sort of clout that Daiyu did not care to know about which accounted for his position. For her part, this little charade was just one of many she was required to suffer and she simply wanted it over as soon as possible.

All she knew was that she was there to step in to answer technical questions that Hsui could not bullshit his way through when meeting with investors. Over the years she had grown quite masterful at the task. The trick was to appear overly enthusiastic as if she were interrupting and then the gracious and wise Dr. Hsui would suffer her precociousness.

This show was payment. Daiyu played along and in return she was unmolested and her initiatives were well-funded. Such situations were much less common in Hong Kong than the mainland for years, but as Beijing grew in influence this was one of the insidious ways it manifested itself.

When Eppie first brought her to the company it was called Genomic Innovations, Inc. Recently, the name was changed to China Genomic Innovations, Inc. Whether Beijing merely had an interest or was surreptitiously controlling the company was not known and the employees knew it was better not to ask. The grave Mr. Wong, the new CEO, gave little doubt that Beijing's influence was substantial if not all together controlling.

Dr. Hsui had a firm belief that women were incapable of being on time for any appointment. Whether they were doing their make-up, menstruating, or engaged in any one of the numerous other frivolities that consumed their attention, he had to make allowances for this fact. As such, he always summoned the women on the team to arrive ten minutes before they were needed. Most of the time, he was content to presume that they arrived, breathlessly, immediately before he did and thus, his patience was greatly appreciated by them. However, on certain occasions he would actually appear at the early time he ordained to confirm for himself his wisdom while he made veiled threats about termination of employment to maintain a healthy fear in the minds of his subordinates.

The fact that he sent Huan to summon them meant that today was one of those occasions. Eppie dreaded the tongue lashing that awaited them for merely being five minutes early and she envied Daiyu's ability to completely ignore the criticism. At times she actually had to suppress a laugh when this dullard would lay into Daiyu for some trivial matter like tardiness or professional attire when he had no clue what they actually did that garnered so much praise for his managerial prowess.

They were called to the rooftop to greet the potential investor as he arrived by helicopter. Daiyu was sickened by the pretension of such an entrance but reported as ordered. As her role in these events was always on the periphery, this would not be the first time she had to endure the explanation of the dearth of private airports and the inordinate amount of time it took to travel the thirty-five kilometers from the international airport which necessitated this mode of travel.

However, accessing the roof required traversing the last two floors by a flight of stairs. As they reached the stairwell, conscious of her fake tardiness, Eppie bound up them like a gazelle in heels. Daiyu gripped the handrail as if she were about to summit Everest blind and began the laborious ascent. She felt as if every step was an insidious form of torture designed to break her mind along with her body. As she trudged on, she plotted who she could kill to exact her vengeance.

As she labored, she kept her head down knowing the distance would not seem as great if she did not look ahead of her. To her great dismay, before she reached the top, she came upon Eppie and a line of people stretching from the door halfway down the last flight of stairs.

“What?!? Seriously?” Daiyu said as she wiped the sweat from her red and heaving face.

Eppie stood there with arms crossed and managed a slight eyeroll. She explained, “I presume that we must stay inside until the helicopter has landed otherwise we will be blown all over the place. You know how narrow that passage is above us. Of course, we could not all fit. Just hold on for a few minutes and I am certain we will all move out soon.”

This response was not satisfactory to Daiyu. “Did they have to bring everyone in the whole lab? Look, even that piece of shit, Huan, is here.”

Huan, who was two meters away from Daiyu turned around and waved at her.

“Hi Huan!” Daiyu said brightly.

Huan may not have held much esteem in Daiyu’s eyes, but he did hold a space on the level ground of the landing at the top of the stairs. Sensing an opportunity, he called down, “Daiyu, here, you can trade places with me and stand here on the level ground and I’ll go down there. I don’t mind standing on the incline. Here let’s...”

As he started to push past Eppie she raised a hand to his face.

“No.” As he started to blow off her reproach as if it were a joke, she said “stop that now you silly boy. Daiyu will not die if she is required to stand here for another five minutes nor will your chivalry do *anything* to soften her heart toward you. Keep a little dignity now.” If she had a rolled-up newspaper, she would have simply smited him on the nose with it.

Daiyu’s panting had subsided by now and she was striving for a good comeback, but before a quip could be fully formed in her mind, the line started moving. Huan turned his back scornfully. His chance for valor was denied unjustly and there was nothing he could do about it.

As they passed through the small hallway and out the door to the roof, Daiyu was struck by the bright afternoon light. The rotors of the helicopter were now almost at rest and the welcoming party was nearly assembled. She was glad to take a spot of anonymity in the back and relished the opportunity to drink in the view.

When you are on the ground looking up at the skyscrapers Hong Kong could be any large city, but here on the roof, it looked like the setting of some future dreamscape. Every inch of space around Victoria Harbor is taken up with pillars of steel and glass, but behind them stands a ring of tall green peaks. Daiyu felt the sea breeze in her face as she looked out on ships of all shapes and sizes, from day sailors to cargo ships, traverse the crystal blue water.

It was a glorious vista and she felt sorry for the small little men in their small little suits so utterly consumed with wrangling a couple of billion dollars from this Westerner that they were oblivious to the miracle of their own city.

When the man finally stepped out of the helicopter, Daiyu lost her breath for a minute. He was not what she was accustomed to seeing emerge from such a conveyance. Before her was no pot-bellied man in his sixties with fake teeth and an expensive, but poorly fitting suit. This man was slender, almost regal, in his trim, but simple, dark blue suit. His long hair was pulled back and affixed with such precision that it would be considered a stylish foreign eccentricity rather than an absurdity by Mr. Wong and his companions.

As he approached and took Wong's hand Daiyu was struck by the nature of his height. Most Westerners are tall, but they act so aggressively with their height. They will get closer than most Chinese people are comfortable with and whether born out of intention or lack of consideration, they end up looking down at their interlocutor at their first encounter. This man did not do that. His arm was stretched perhaps a little farther than he was comfortable with, but the effect was to maintain a more level plain for eye contact with the shorter man.

However, his next act was more remarkable. As he took Mr. Wong's hand, he thanked him for the welcome in mandarin. As they spoke, it became clear to Daiyu that this man understood mandarin better than she did. She could not even detect a Western accent. As he made his way down the receiving line, he shook hands and exchanged greetings until Mr. Wong's body language signaled that they had reached the end of the important people and would now pick up the pace. He then moved more quickly and put his hand on his breast and gave a slight nod to the remaining assemblage he passed. When they reached the end of the line, Mr. Wong was ready to continue, but the man stopped abruptly.

"Song Daiyu?" the man asked when he reached her.

"Yes, I..." she said in English instinctively and in that moment Daiyu's childhood education in a British school came back to her and she nearly curtsied. Instead, she managed only a subtle dip and stuck out a hand.

The man took it softly and said, "I am very pleased to meet you Dr. Song. My name is Jude."

Keying in on his Western informality she said, "please, please. Call me Daiyu. It is a pleasure to meet you as well."

Jude continued, "I have reviewed your research carefully and you have really made some impressive developments, I was hoping to..."

Just then Dr. Hsui interrupted and said, "yes, yes, Daiyu has been of great assistance to me and..."

Jude returned the interruption, "far more than assistance, I would say. Her innovation in isolated specimen growth is what attracted Antioch's attention. In fact, that is the reason I am here. Her technology is the only chance your company has of getting around the West's anti-human cloning laws and the firm is very excited about the potential here."

“Yes, but,” Hsui said as Mr. Wong placed a hand on his shoulder and gently, but unmistakably, guided him to a spot behind Jude. He then extended a hand to motion for Daiyu to join them as they walked.

“Of course, Dr. Song is at your disposal. She will be leading the tour of the laboratory right after our luncheon. Come, I believe they are ready to serve and I know you must be hungry after your trip,” Mr. Wong said as he motioned for the three of them to continue. Daiyu’s heart started beating out of her chest at the thought that she would have to *lead* any tour.

She then stepped forward and looked back at Hsui. If the man could shoot lasers out of his eyes, she would be a smoldering stain on the pavement. So intense was his glare that she worried he might spontaneously develop that ability. She was then gripped with panic at this unlooked-for development. Daiyu had no ambition for notoriety. She simply wanted to go about her work and now she feared that Hsui would make her life miserable after this day.

How the hell did this happen?

Daiyu was so gob smacked by the development on the roof that she hardly noticed the trip down the stairs. As they walked, Jude continued to ask very pointed questions and Wong, to his credit, deftly looped Daiyu into the answers as if they were close colleagues and had exchanged more than a half a dozen words with one another in the past. Dr. Hsui continued to buzz on the periphery like a house fly, generally ignored until he asserted himself so forcefully on occasions that it took a second to swat him away before returning to matters at hand.

As they reached the lifts, the assemblage knew not to crowd the lift with Mr. Wong and the guest and kept a respectful distance to wait for them to depart. As the door opened and Mr. Wong gestured for Jude to enter, he followed, but slyly took Daiyu by the wrist as she started to hold back with the rest of the crowd. Seeing this, Hsui sprang forward and forced his way inside causing the doors to retract due to the obstruction. He stepped in front of Daiyu physically forcing her to the rear of the compartment. Jude then stepped back behind him so he could stand next to Daiyu and continue their conversation. Now it was Wong’s turn to shoot the laser beams, but his would have utterly disintegrated Hsui wiping his existence from the earth without the courtesy of a stain on the floor.

As they entered the company dining room, Daiyu saw the staff hurriedly completing a rearrangement of place settings. Wong’s assistant, Min, was brilliant and set this change in motion the minute Jude stopped to speak with Daiyu. That part was easy. The second rearrangement upon observing Hsui’s interactions was more difficult. Jude was seated at the center of the table with Wong on his right and now Daiyu on his left. To Daiyu’s great relief, she saw that Eppie was seated right beside her. Min was always kind to her and was delighted that her gesture was acknowledged and appreciated as Daiyu looked at her from across the room with an appreciative nod.

As they took their seats, Eppie passed Daiyu and gently ran a soft reassuring hand across her shoulder as she sat down. Fortunately, the conversation shifted from her work to general

matters of economics and assurances from Wong that Beijing would not be interfering economically with their business. Daiyu was glad for a minute to look over the menu and breathe. Then she suddenly became aware of a thousand other insecurities as every eye at the table was on her, but especially Hsui's at the far-end barely within shouting distance of Jude.

Daiyu was a bit overheated now that she had time to think about her comfort. She deeply regretted the choice of the white turtleneck under her black overall bib dress. The layers under her lab coat were stifling and she now worried that she may have forgotten to put on deodorant today. She leaned an elbow on the table and then rested the side of her head on her palm. As her fingers extended up to the crown of her head, she felt the pencils and had to resist the urge to pluck them out. She realized there was a fair chance they were at least a part of the superstructure holding the bun in place and, particularly given that she had not washed her hair the night before, it would thus be a bad idea to tamper with them now.

"Relax," Eppie said as she leaned in close to use a soft tone. "You're doing great and he seems to really care about your work. Don't overthink things."

Daiyu, who was never at a loss for words, was nonetheless silent in this moment and managed only a little nod. As she perused the menu looking for the least messy thing to select, the server came to take Jude's order. He engaged with her in English initially so as not to offend her and to show appreciation for her effort in that regard, but then he switched to Cantonese to explain to her that he eats seafood and poultry, but no mammals.

Daiyu then leaned over to Eppie and said, "he speaks duck *and* chicken. Who is this guy?"

She could do no more than shrug and smile in reply.

After the meal, Jude suffered the obligatory tour of the office and the primary lab space, but there was only one thing he truly wished to see. Wong was able to conduct the tour of the main lab facilities with surprising efficiency for a layperson. Clearly, he had been studying as his presentation was far more accurate than previous efforts when he simply differed to Dr. Hsui. Daiyu had never really concerned herself with the business end of the company, but she knew it was necessary to pay for her work so somehow she endured these meetings. However, as they continued, she found that she was actually impressed to see a salesman of Wong's caliber applying his trade.

To Daiyu her research would help people and that was the end of the inquiry into its utility as far as she was concerned. Whether or not her efforts would be profitable and whether that profit could be realized in an amount of time to suit an investor were absurd concerns to her.

Fortunately, after leaving the main lab, Mr. Wong dismissed the rest of the entourage. He was indeed a shrewd businessman and he knew the audience would impede their ability to connect with Jude and close this deal. He picked the precise moment to excuse everyone but himself and Daiyu before getting to the part of the tour that Jude really cared about.

Her lab was very small compared to the other spaces. Realistically, it could actually fit four people comfortably, but other than Eppie and Huan, Daiyu trusted no one else in her

space and practically snarled at anyone foolish enough to come snooping unbidden. As they entered, she was pleased to see that Eppie had been at work prior to their arrival actually cleaning to normal people's standards. She had been informed previously that Daiyu-cleaning was perhaps half a step above what a goat would do.

Mr. Wong said, "now I will turn the presentation over to Dr. Song to show us what you most came to see. Doctor, proceed."

In order to get through lunch Daiyu had to put the thought of giving a tour of her lab out of her mind. Now that the moment had arrived, she decided to just dive in without hesitation. She led them to the far side of the room that had a bank of metal compartments taking up the entire wall. They were slate grey with a plain metal facing. At first glance one might assume they were merely large lockers as the only adornment were simple numbers from one to four. Daiyu entered a code on the numeric pad to the right of the compartments and they opened slowly.

The compartment closest to Daiyu was empty, but the other three had large cylinders, two meters long and half a meter wide filled with a clear, illuminated blue liquid. Suspended in each chamber were organs, two kidneys, a liver, and a heart.

"Remarkable," Jude said. "Are they all from the same donor?"

"Yes," replied Daiyu. "These are the first-generation stasis tubes. In my spare time I have been working on improving them," she said before moving to the compartments on the left which were concealed by a drape.

"These are the fourth gen version. It's the same basic design, only these draw much less power and the circuitry is much more firm. The goal is to have something that can run indefinitely through solar cells and batteries rather than having to be hardwired in one place."

As Daiyu spoke she pulled back the long black drape covering the compartments. Instead of tubes the gen four model consisted of more compact cubes. As Jude looked there were smaller organs in each container. A heart, intestines, two kidneys, a liver, two lungs, and a pancreas. They were arranged in banks of three, one on top of the other, and in three rows. In the last container on the bottom right Jude saw what looked like half a hip bone.

"Why are these organs so much smaller than the others?" Jude asked.

"Because they are much younger. That is the main problem and I don't really know the solution to it or if there even can be a solution really." At this Wong bristled, but wisely restrained himself from offering any comment. He sensed this meeting was going well and was not thrilled with this huge investor being told about problems.

Daiyu sensed his consternation and continued, "we can grow organs in isolation, but we can't grow them any faster than they would grow in the body. These organs are only thirty months old. The organs in the first gen stasis tubes are over seven years old. That is the main worry. If someone needs a new heart, they likely will not have the luxury of ten years to grow one."

Wong held his breath. This reality was his greatest fear and Song just threw it out there with no warning.

“How long can the organs be held in stasis after they are fully grown?” Jude asked.

Daiyu had not given much thought to this question, “well, indefinitely,” she said. “Once the organs are fully grown that’s it for them. Our bodies age because of use. Over time metabolic processes begin to break the tissue down and then damage is caused by the millions of things in our environment that we are exposed to. Everything from fatty foods, to UV radiation, even the process of respiration. These organs are never used and never exposed to environmental factors so they just stay in stasis as long as the containment unit is intact.”

“So, people could have vital organs grown and stored in case they needed them in the future?” Jude asked.

“Conceivably, sure, but practically that would require billions and billions of units. Multiple units for every person on Earth would be a difficult challenge.”

Wong’s fear dissolved and a smile he had a difficult time containing crept onto his face. This prospect had not occurred to him previously. He did not consider a product that every person on Earth would have a dire need to purchase to be a problem. Well, at least not for those who could pay for it which would only be a quarter of the population at most. Still this was enough to make his company the most profitable in the history of the Earth. He was now certain this investor would be a lock and he needed only this infusion of capital to make this potential a reality.

His fantasy was engorged by a follow up question from Jude. “Why ‘multiple units?’”

“We cannot grow different types of organs in the same unit. So, if every person was to grow the six organs that can be transplanted, plus a source of bone marrow, they would need nine units like we have here.”

Wong continued to beam.

“Do you have to isolate the organs? Do you have to separate them?” Jude asked in sustained peak interest.

Daiyu was getting tired now and needed to sit and if she was going to get into this topic, she was going to need to settle in. She kicked a rolling lab stool over to Jude and sat down on one herself. In the moment she forgot about Wong, but he was not put out in the least. He quickly grabbed the nearest chair and sat down eagerly to tend his newfound golden goose.

“*That* is a subject that causes Western governments to sour on these initiatives quickly. That is why we have focused so much attention on first being able to clone with epithelial cells rather than stem cells and why it has been absolutely crucial to be able to isolate the individual organs. Of course, it would actually be a hell of a lot easier to just clone an entire body and keep it in stasis indefinitely until it is needed. And, I actually think that would be incredibly helpful because we do not know what other components of the body might become useful in the future. But the thought of cutting up a spare body freaks most people out. If they knew how this works, they might be okay with it over time and I don’t really see a problem with it,” Daiyu explained.

“Wait,” Jude said. “I was thinking about cloning a torso but hold on. Why wouldn’t it be a problem to cut up a person when you need their organs even if that person had your DNA? Aside from the fact that it’s illegal in the West, of course.”

“It is not a person. You cannot think of these things as artificial wombs, that’s not how they work. If it came down to it, the brain would be the most useless thing for us. It’s not needed to run the body in these fields so it’s just a useless grey lump. The specimen would never have any consciousness,” she responded.

“What if someone were to break the containment field thinking they were freeing someone who was imprisoned?” Jude asked, drawing out what would undoubtedly be the chief absurd Western concern.

“They would instantly destroy the specimen. Look the brain works through a complex interplay of the endocrine system and the nervous system, but also because it is constantly exposed to stimuli from its development. If the brain is never used, it would not know to tell the lungs to breathe and the heart to beat. Break containment and the tissues will just die because the brain won’t be able to regulate the body.”

Jude sat back and rubbed his chin. As he did so, his watch sent him an alert that grabbed his attention. “Wow, we have been here for quite some time. I am so sorry Doctor. Mr. Wong. I have another appointment I must be getting to.”

Wong’s face collapsed as Jude rose to leave. He half contemplated tackling him or bribing him to stay.

Then Jude said to Daiyu, “needless to say, I am fascinated by your work Doctor. I hate to impose, but would you be free to come by my hotel this evening to finish our conversation? I am staying at the Four Seasons and should be free around eight.”

Daiyu was taken aback by this request. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth gaped for a moment as she searched for the words.

“Of course, of course!” Mr. Wong said before she could respond. “We all know how important this partnership is to our company and who could say no to an evening at the Four Seasons with such company? You’re not busy this evening are you Dr. Song?”

The conflict in her mind was overwhelming, but all she could manage was a shake of the head.

“Good, good,” Wong said now practically picking up Jude from his seat before she could change her mind. “Oh, Min is here. Yes, Min?”

“I am sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Jude your driver says that you must leave now if you are to make your next appointment on time due to traffic conditions,” Min reported.

Flustered, Jude said, “I am so terribly sorry and I greatly appreciate your time Mr. Wong and I have taken the doctor away from her work for too long.” Turning to Daiyu he said, “thank you for indulging me, Doctor. I will leave word with the concierge to have a pass card for elevator access to our corporate suite ready for you at the front desk. I am so very sorry for this imposition.”

Daiyu smiled and took his hand to shake it, but before she could speak again Mr. Wong interrupted. "Oh, it's no imposition at all. Here let's go, I will walk with you to the car."

As they left, Daiyu slumped back down on the stool and pushed herself backwards across the room. 'What did he mean by *indulging* him?' she thought to herself. She then caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the lab sink. Looking at her round face and belly in her dress that had now become a half a size too small she began to feel as if she was being arrogant for thinking this handsome billionaire wanted to fuck her.

She stood and walked over to the mirror and took a long look at the reflection. After a while she had a little chuckle. *Despite your education, your achievements, and just now having the rapt attention of all these powerful men, in an instant you're made to feel useless because of the shape of your cheekbones, Daiyu*, she said to herself. She had no desire to be put in this position of having to question everything about herself to fit into this man's schedule at best or to satisfy some base desire at worst. She resolved to tell Mr. Wong that she would not go this evening.

However, before she could screw up the courage to trek up to his top floor office, Mr. Wong, to her great surprise, bounced back in the door to her lab. He was positively giddy and unconsciously performed a half skip in his step as he excitedly rushed over to her and took her by the hand while she remained seated.

"Well done, Dr. Song! Well done! I could not be more pleased with how that meeting went. He is all onboard. Mr. Jude tells me that he has a few more technical questions for you when you meet tonight, but that they should be ready to close the deal in a couple of weeks. Now, let's talk about what to expect tonight..."

"About that Mr. Wong. I do not feel comfortable at all being summoned to his hotel room. That puts me in a very uncomfortable situation and I will not do it."

Wong was not going to be daunted by schoolgirl prudishness that he could explain away. "Now, Dr. Song, I think you completely misunderstood our guest. Mr. Jude is a very busy man and this is just how business deals like this get done. There is nothing inappropriate about his request."

Daiyu rose to speak with him eye to eye. She was not going to let him literally look down his nose at her while he dismissed her personhood entirely for the sole benefit of his retirement plan.

"Then why didn't he ask me to meet him at a restaurant or coffee shop? He asked me. No, he *instructed* me to come to his room. I just do not feel comfortable with that. Much less being ordered to do it."

Wong became more desperate now that he realized this was more than typical overboard virtue protection that could be overcome with a few earnest reassurances. "Dr. Song, I understand this is not your world, but I assure you, people do not discuss billion dollar... wait, *multi* billion dollar deals at a coffee shop. You have to have privacy. People know who he is and if they hear him talking about these details it could completely ruin the negotiations."

Daiyu could smell the bullshit he was laying it on so thick. “Mr. Wong, he may not have bad intentions, but I am not going to put myself in a position where I have to be fearful of that all night long. The request was inappropriate and I see nothing wrong with asking him to meet at a more appropriate time and place. If he has no bad intentions, that should not be a difficult request to grant.”

Seeing he was utterly defeated with placations Wong grew wrathful. His expression became grim and Daiyu saw him clinch both fists tightly. He closed his eyes and she saw him take a deep breath before his next words which were not chosen carefully.

“Don’t be such a child. You’re not married. Look at yourself. You’re a mess. Do you even care about how you look to men at all? You want to tell me that your mother is shooing away tall, handsome billionaires at your front door? Huh? One would think you would jump at this chance. Hell, I would go if he asked me. A night at the Four Seasons does not exactly sound like torture to me.”

“Then why don’t you go?” Daiyu responded.

Wong felt a fury unlike anything he had experienced in his adult life. No one had ever dared to speak to him with such insolence, much less a woman. However, before he could unleash his wrath, she continued.

“Sell yourself then if that is your wish Mr. Wong. Frankly, I do not care what price you would assign to me, as low as it may be, because I am not for sale. Not to you. Not to him. Not to anybody.” She then turned to leave and Wong’s wrath gave way to panic. The golden goose was flying from the coup.

“If you walk out that door Dr. Song, you doom us all,” he said to her ominously.

She stopped to listen but did not turn around.

“This is our one chance. You have to understand. Antioch Capital is the oldest and most exclusive venture capital firm in the world. It’s not just the 2.5 *BILLION* dollars they are going to invest in us. They do not invest in losers. Not ever. If they make that commitment to us, it will be a signal to the rest of the world that our technology is real and everyone will jump at the chance to buy our product.”

She turned around to look at him as he spoke and he took this as an encouraging sign that he was finally getting through to her. He continued, “everything you have worked so hard for your entire life will come to pass. Your innovations will change the world and you will be right there front and center for it all as our new director of research and vice president. Think about it. You will be the one right there beside me at the press conference and when we change the world, you will be the one accepting the Nobel Prize.”

His eyes gleamed and the fantasies of wildest excess to any scientist poured forth, but she was unmoved. The carrot failed so it was time to bring out the stick. “But if you don’t, know this: we are in Beijing’s crosshairs. If we can make the government truckloads of money, they are happy to let us go and do it. But if not, they will take control of this lab. They will seize all of this technology and you will spend the rest of your days keeping senior party officials alive well into their second century, but no more will ever be heard from you.”

Daiyu took a minute to choose her next words carefully and Wong allowed false hope to fill him so that he was practically standing on his toes with anticipation. She looked down for a moment before seizing his eyes in a steely and resolute stare.

"Then so be it," she said. "If the government wants to take my life, then so be it. But they are going to have to take it. I will not sell myself for any price, much less *give* myself away. Goodbye Mr. Wong." She then turned and walked out the door.

Wong sat there stunned for a minute then ran to the door as she walked down the hall. He yelled after her, "just think about it Daiyu! Just think about it! Be there at eight tonight and your whole world will change. Just don't make a decision while you're angry. Think about it!!!"

Dejected, he walked back into the empty lab and violently kicked at the rolling stool intending to send it sailing to the other side of the room. But his blow was errant and the stool merely skidded a few feet away causing him to stumble in the process. He then turned around intending to flip the lab table over in his wrath, but as he impotently pushed, he noticed that it was bolted to the ground. He then looked around in rage for something to destroy. Seeing nothing that was not insanely expensive around him he settled for one of the pencils in the cup on Daiyu's desk and snapped it in half in his fury and tossed the pieces across the room. He felt a little better as he stomped out the door.

Daiyu spent the rest of the day aimlessly riding around town on the MTR and thinking. She stopped for coffee and thought. She stopped for noodles and thought. As a central distraction to all of this thinking she realized that she was rarely in the tourist area on Hong Kong Island and she thought she would take advantage of it. For years now she had been wanting to take a ride on the giant Ferris wheel they built next to the harbor, but none of her friends would indulge the exorbitant expense of this tourist trap. She would not remedy that wanting.

For Daiyu it seemed like a good place to get a good view and a few more precious minutes to think. Fortunately, she came at the perfect time. As her capsule reached the peak of the wheel, she was presented with a glorious view of the setting sun on the horizon of the harbor. For a moment the entire world was arrayed in dazzling purple. The sky was purple. The water was purple. The glass in the surrounding skyscrapers was purple. She was lost in purple and she wondered how such a color could even be real much less consuming all existence.

In the far distance the dying sunlight was fighting with the horizon and all the lights in the office buildings started to flick on like fireflies. A couple of blocks away she saw the tall peaks of the Four Seasons Hotel and knew that it was time for a decision.

As utterly detestable as Wong was, she could not get his words out of her head. She thought of what the future would hold. She thought about standing on that stage in Stockholm accepting her Nobel Prize. Before today she never considered that to be a possibility. She would save millions of lives and in the process build a life of comfort for herself and her mother.

Moreover, who was she kidding, Wong was right. This gorgeous billionaire was not interested in her. Why was she deceiving herself this way? Plus, she was no weakling. If he tried anything she was pretty sure she could take him. Pretty sure.

All these thoughts went through her mind as she made her way to the entrance. But, before she walked through, she could not overcome the main thought that plagued her. Realistically, she knew she did not fear an attack, but she resented the presumption, the repugnant presumption. The presumption that at the end of the day she was just a cunt to be fucked at the will of the powerful should he desire to go slumming. Her mind, her self, her desires were irrelevant to men who take. Perhaps the irrelevancy was what made the conquest so attractive to them.

No, nothing was worth that. Nothing. She turned and walked away.

Though she turned, she was not ready to go home, not yet. Was she being ridiculous? Was she dooming millions of people who could be saved by her technology to continue to suffer and die while its benefits were hoarded by a cadre of greedy party leaders? This man, this Jude, had been so courteous to her. He acknowledged her. He spent so much time learning about her research and gave her credit for everything while seeing through the fog thrown up by the powerful men. Clearly, he had not traveled halfway across the world just to get in her pants? Why did he ruin all that by inviting her to his hotel room?

Daiyu was not paying attention at all to where she was going. She simply turned and went in the opposite direction from the hotel entrance. This path led away from the water and into the forest made of glass and steel. The buildings in this coveted patch of earth on Hong Kong Island were monstrous to make use of every square inch of space. One could only see the tops of the buildings by stopping and craning the neck so far back that a limbo bar would be appropriate. When she looked up, Daiyu felt as if she were trapped in some giant's labyrinth.

The wind blew fiercely through this man-made cavern and it made her shiver, but soon she found the cold was not the only thing concerning her. She wandered so lost in thought that she became lost in person. She had no idea where she was and it was getting late. She scanned the signs around her and saw nothing pointing to a train station.

Giving up the search she reached in her bag for her phone to summon a ride. As she touched the screen, nothing happened. She tapped a few times and held down the lock button hoping that she might have powered it down at some point during the day. The thing was getting old now and the battery was dying frequently, so she did often shut it down to preserve power, but not today. It was a lifeless brick. With the day's events she simply forgot to charge it.

Of course there had to be a train station nearby, but with no way to navigate she did not want to become more lost trying to guess which way to go. She could have kicked herself for not just getting on the train at the station right next to the hotel. She could have done her thinking on the train, not wandering around in an area she did not know. She resolved that

the best option was to go back the way she came and head for the station she was certain was there.

She did an about face and walked with a quick pace back toward the hotel. After a few blocks she was surprised to see that she had not walked very far. Given the length of time she wandered, she assumed she would be halfway across the island by now. But, though she walked for about an hour, her pace was ambling and slow. She became encouraged that her trek back would thus not be as arduous as she thought it would be.

Of course, there would always be human obstacles. Presently, she had to shuffle and slide along the side of a building to give space to a group of a half a dozen young men who were knee walking drunk stumbling past her as they seized control of the entire sidewalk.

As she passed, one of the men said, “hey. Hey! Excuse me. That’s what you’re supposed to say when you push past someone you know.” His words fell out of his drunken lips before his addled mind was even conscious they had been formed.

Daiyu said nothing and quickened her pace.

“Hey. Hey!” they all cried as the pack of inebriants suddenly felt challenged in their foggy mean little brains into a pursuit. The men gave chase and surrounded her blocking her path.

“I’m sorry,” the young man who originally addressed her said. They were all wearing suits, wrinkled and disheveled now from a night in the bars. They were suffering from far too much coin in their pockets coupled with a lack of sense in their brains. The man now buttoned his jacket without straightening his tie. “I sorry that was not polite of us. You see we are celebrating because we all just got promotions, all of us!” and the group cheered.

“Congratulations,” Daiyu said and then struggled past them once more.

They caught her up again.

“Hey, wait now. Wait now. Wait now. Shhh... No, I was saying. Shh... I was saying that you. You should come and have a drink with us to celebrate. Let’s come. Come on now, let’s have a drink with us,” the young man said as he attempted to turn her around simply assuming she would assent.

The rest of the crew joined in. “Yeah, come drink with us.” “Drink, drink, drink!”

Daiyu managed a polite, “no thank you” and continued to walk now really starting to panic.

“No, come on now. I’m serious now,” the young man said and hooked his arm around her elbow and pulled her in the opposite direction. Daiyu wrenched her arm back forcefully and pushed her way through the group and nearly started running now. In his drunken state, the man could not handle this shift in momentum and fell to the ground.

One of the group stopped to tend him and the other four caught up to Daiyu and surrounded her demanding that she “apologize.” Daiyu turned around in panic and started yelling, “get away from me!”

The young man regained his footing but was now full of rage. He stormed up to her as his mates parted to make way.

"Hey bitch! Who the fuck do you think you are? I was trying to be nice to you and you act like that. You fat bitch. You're lucky a man wants to talk to you in the first place you fucking pig. Who taught you manners? Yeah, they're right. You owe me an apology."

"Get away from me. Get away!" Daiyu screamed.

The least drunk among them realized that they needed to get off the street and pushed Daiyu into an adjacent alley and the rest followed. The leader of the group then resumed.

"Yeah, you know, I think you do owe me," he said as he moved in toward her with menace. "You owe me something..."

As he made a move to grab her, Daiyu cocked back her right fist and turning, delivered a quick, strong punch squarely to the man's face. His head snapped back and blood immediately shot out from his broken nose. In one movement he fell to the pavement stunned.

Before Daiyu knew what was happening she suddenly felt a tremendous blow between her shoulders unlike anything she had ever experienced before. This was no playground shove, but a full-grown man focusing his entire power to push her to the ground with violence. She hit the ground face first, her forearms and knees screaming in pain from absorbing the impact. Before she had time to take stock, another man wrenched her back up to her feet and threw her against the wall. Two men pinned her up against the brick as the bloodied brute who first attacked her had now risen to his feet in fury.

Without even wiping the copious amount of blood from his face he now charged at her screaming like some battled crazed ancient warrior on a field of combat raised with bloodlust and bent entirely on destroying his foe. As the man pulled his fist back to strike her there suddenly came a piercing high pitch screech coming from just above them. Daiyu felt like the noise was actually inside her head. She could feel it in her teeth and put her hands to her ears as did all of her assailants.

Daiyu looked up and above her were six flashing red balls of light. They began to whirl overhead. Five of the orbs revolved in a circular orbit around one larger ball in the center. They increased in velocity as all seven of them watched. Suddenly there was a bright flash of light and Daiyu felt like bolts of lightning just struck all around her.

In that instant the men holding her suddenly went completely limp and collapsed to the ground as did the other four men. For a moment, Daiyu stood dazed looking at the heaps of bodies at her feet. She then looked up and saw that the red color on the orbs slowly faded. For a moment they lingered above her and she thought she saw a mirrored reflection of the streetlights in these small metal balls. They were the size of a squash ball whereas the one in the center was a little larger, the size of a racquetball. As she watched them, the orbs then quickly vanished into the shadows.

As she stood there dazed, she heard the quick approach of someone running toward her. As the footfalls skidded to a stop, she heard a familiar voice from the silhouette of the man in the streetlight.

“Daiyu?” He approached her and lightly touched her arm as she stood there still dazed for a moment staring at him. “Daiyu, are you okay?”

Now desperately pleased to see someone she recognized, Daiyu clinged to Jude and pulled him out of the alley. She simultaneously wanted to be sheltered and to get away from that scene as fast as she could. Jude held her arms as they hurried away from the scene.

“We need to call the police,” he said.

“No, no. I need to get away from here. I need to get away from them,” she pleaded with tears in her eyes. Jude nodded and made no attempt to dissuade her from this request.

However, after a few blocks he said, “Daiyu, let me call a car. We need to get you to a hospital to get you checked out.”

“No. No!” she screamed. “I can’t wait for a car. I can’t wait here. I need to get somewhere safe. Please.”

Again, Jude nodded. “The hotel is right there,” he said. “Let’s get off the street and sit in the lobby for a bit so we can take stock of everything.”

Daiyu was in shock and terrified and did not know what she wanted other than to be somewhere safe. As they entered the grand hotel lobby, the air was cool and the lighting was soft. Seeing that they entered in distress, two members of the staff ran up to them to offer assistance. Jude simply asked for space, water, and a first aid kit. Shortly, they came to a soft leather sofa in a small alcove just off the main lobby.

Almost immediately after Daiyu sank into the rich leather of the deep sofa, a staff member appeared with water, ice, and a small first aid kit. She then tactfully gave them some space saying that she would be nearby if they needed anything else. Jude sat on the coffee table directly in front of her and was utterly distraught. He wrung his hands between his knees as he looked down.

When he looked up tears were welling in his eyes as he said, “Daiyu, I am so, so sorry. I am so sorry I put you in this position. When you didn’t come, I realized how it appeared when I pretty much insisted that you come to my hotel. It was my thoughtlessness that put you in this position and I am terribly sorry.”

Daiyu had other things apart from absolution on her mind at the moment and paid no heed to how earnest his apology may have been.

“Are they dead?” she asked.

“No,” Jude replied. “Although they may wish to be for a little while after they wake up.”

So, he did have something to do with it. His presence there could not have been a coincidence, Daiyu thought to herself. Without realizing it, her curiosity overcame her distress. She sank back into the sofa and folded her hands in front of her mouth as she took stock of the facts and her next line of inquiry. She stared off into space as was her custom in these moments.

Jude gave her a few moments patiently and managed to gather himself as well.

“Daiyu, I really think we ought to get you checked out at a hospital. You could...”

“I did not take a blow to the head. I do not have any acute pain. Other than some sore knees and forearms, there is nothing else wrong. I am okay,” she replied resolutely, but remotely. She was giving a clinical diagnosis while trying to divert as little mental energy to the task as possible.

“Yes, but just to make sure ought we not...”

Daiyu interrupted again, “if I do not have any warning signs of head injury, or fracture, or internal bleeding, anything like that, there’s nothing the emergency room is going to do for me except to keep me waiting there all night. Also, not to be arrogant, but there’s really not much an emergency doctor is going to know that I do not.”

Jude nodded and said no more.

After a while she said, “there is one thing I need,” and Daiyu looked over her shoulder to motion to the concierge standing nearby pretending to be occupied with other concerns.

When she came over to them Daiyu said, “may I have a whisky please. Scotch whisky and,” she turned to Jude, “you’re paying for this right?” Jude nodded and made a gesture to continue with her order. Acknowledging, Daiyu continued, “single malt, just a couple cubes of ice, with a splash of water. And make it something old please.”

The concierge looked at Jude and back to her and said, “we have a twenty-five-year-old Macallan, but it cannot be purchased by the glass.”

“The bottle is fine,” Jude responded and the concierge turned to leave.

“Wait,” Daiyu said. “I didn’t just order something that could feed a village for a month, did I?”

“No,” the nice lady said with an air of uncertainty not wanting to be deceptive, but not quite sure how to answer honestly.

“How...?” Daiyu asked sheepishly.

“Think the cost of a very used moped,” she replied.

Daiyu thought for a moment and said, “yeah... yeah, I’ve had a used moped level shitty day. That will work.” The concierge then left with a smile to fill the order. Daiyu then sat back now very curious to see what a liquid moped tastes like.

“Oh shit,” she said suddenly taking stock of her surroundings, “we’re in the lobby, not the bar. Can I even...”

Jude just smiled. “It’s fine, Daiyu. I promise.”

He then felt a little silly and uncomfortable sitting on the coffee table and moved to the leather club chair facing her. Daiyu stopped staring into space and then took a few moments to look this guy over but said nothing. He was still wearing the same suit from this morning though the tie had been jettisoned. He showed no discomfort at being scanned and sat back in his chair, crossed his legs, and looked at her. He said much with his eyes alone. He looked like someone who welcomed questions hoping to receive the right ones.

The staff member returned with Daiyu’s drink and brought an identical one to Jude.

“I took the liberty, Mr. Jude, if that is okay?” she asked.

“Of course, thank you very much, Jun.”

As she handed Jude the drink, Daiyu took a sip and exclaimed, “holy shit!” Jun started with surprise. “Is this what rich people drink?” Realizing that everything was satisfactory, Jun quietly took her leave.

As Daiyu settled in and took another sip Jude said, “Daiyu, I owe you an explanation. You see...”

“Da, da, da, da...” Daiyu interrupted wagging her right finger at Jude while she took another sip. “We’ll come back to that. I have more questions.”

“Of course,” Jude said. “Shoot.”

Daiyu took a big sip and then sat her drink on the coffee table before she began. “So, I didn’t imagine the floating metal balls that zapped those assholes into unconsciousness.”

“No,” Jude replied.

Daiyu nodded as she considered the next question.

“So, how did you know where I was?”

“They told me,” Jude replied.

“They *told* you?” Again, Jude nodded.

“How did they know where I was?”

“I sent them to find you.” With that Daiyu could sense that Jude wanted to say more but did not want to co-opt her interrogation.

“Alright, alright, I can tell you’re dying. Just get it off your chest and we can pick this back up when you’re done,” she said.

Jude gave a slight sigh at the criticism rebuking himself. He could not stop stepping in it today. But he continued with what he wanted to say. “I... I made a miscalculation,” he started.

“No shit?” Daiyu said having now picked up her glass before taking a sip to settle in for what he was going to say.

“I needed to get you away from Wong and I couldn’t think of an excuse to make that happen. I thought inviting you to my hotel room would make him naturally jump to the lascivious assumption and of course offer you up without hesitation in his greed. But I thought you would be able to see that was not my intention. It was stupid of me but in the moment, I thought it was a good solution to get you away from Wong. After I said it, I immediately saw the look on your face and realized I made a mistake but I had already stepped in it. After I left, I called Dr. Li and got your phone number...”

How did he get Eppie’s number? Daiyu thought.

Jude continued, “I called several times, but it went straight to voice mail every time.” *Seriously, how long have I been wandering around Hong Kong with a dead cell phone?* “When eight o’clock came and went, I got nervous and sent *them* out looking for you.”

“So...” Daiyu began in reply, “here’s a crazy idea. You managed to get my number. Did you ever think about, I don’t know, waiting until after work was over and then calling me like a normal person? No, you decided to go with the ‘make her feel like a sex worker’ plan. Cool.”

Daiyu enjoyed watching him squirm, but she could see his remorse was genuine.

“Jude,” she said trying to break the tension. “A lot has transpired to bring us together, so why don’t you tell me what you wanted to tell me? Perhaps in the process, I’ll get some more of my questions answered about... *them*.”

Jude took a deep breath and hesitated. Now that the moment had arrived, he was not sure how to proceed, but he said, “for many, many, years now my friends and I have been focused on identifying people who have the talent and vision to develop new technologies that can make people’s lives better...”

He stopped when he saw Daiyu roll her eyes and sit back in her chair with a disappointed huff.

“Oh, please spare me the shareholder’s speech. Stop acting like investing in technologies that have made you billions is some altruistic act for the benefit of humanity. That your employees are your *friends*,” she said.

“Ahh... you mean all this,” Jude replied pointing around the obscenely expensive hotel and moped Scotch. “Antioch gives me access to finding people like you, Daiyu. All of this is the mask I have to wear or I would not get in the door. The company is a non-profit. Every penny it makes is invested in schools all over the world to foster the next generation. Schools like the Sha Tin School of Technology.”

“What, my grammar school?” she asked.

“Yes, and thousands more like it. The capital it invests in private industries is done with very strict rules and always, always with anonymity. Those rules are designed to perpetuate discoveries and to support the next generation of scientific minds, not make money,” he replied.

“Well, how do you get the money in the first place for all of this if you’re supposedly giving it all away?”

“Antioch is very, very, *very* ancient. In appreciation for the investment it makes in new technologies, the patentholders who benefit almost always leave a bequest to the fund in their wills. Over very many years, that amount has grown to a very substantial endowment and Antioch invests the interest off that endowment.”

Jude paused a minute, uncrossed his legs, and moved up on the seat of his chair before continuing.

“But Daiyu, I am not here to pursue some investment for Antioch. In fact, I have nothing to do with running the firm at all. The resources that Antioch has at its disposal helped me find you and *you* are the reason I am here. I need your help.”

Daiyu, just shook her head, “look all of that sounds great, but I am not interested in developing weapons. I am grateful that your... balls or whatever you call them, stopped those creeps, but that kind of technology scares me.”

“That is one of the reasons I need *you*, Daiyu. My... *friends* there are not weapons. They are not used for surveillance or killing. The stun function they performed was to save an innocent person from violence. They are helpers and they have a lot of functionality that I

want to show you along with other new technologies that you cannot even begin to imagine. Your innovations are in that category. The category of new discoveries that are too important to be commoditized and hoarded only for the wealthy.”

Daiyu’s face softened and her interest was definitely piqued. This man did not speak like an investment banker.

Jude continued, “you cannot see it right now Daiyu, but events have been put into place that will bring humanity to a crossroads. One path leads to utter destruction through greed and waste and violence. The other, much, much narrower and steeper path, leads to a future of enlightenment and peace where humans are focused on learning and exploring and growing leaving the past of accumulation of things behind them. I am here to do everything I can to help this planet take the harder road. But I need help. If you come with me, I will introduce you to people who, just like you, have made discoveries that will do no less than save this planet from ruin.”

He was serious. She could see that in his eyes. Daiyu saw an opportunity for meaning in her life beyond anything she had ever imagined. But ‘go with him?’ The weight of her reality came screaming back to her thoughts now and she was overcome with grief and longing and could not hold back her tears.

“*Come with you?* Good god, do I want to. You want me to come to a fucking utopia where science is used to make people’s lives better instead of making money, but I can’t. I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

She put a hand to her mouth and got up to leave in a rush.

“Daiyu, wait, please!” Jude called after her. She ignored him and continued rushing toward the exit.

“What about your phone?” Jude called again behind her. Daiyu had indeed forgotten about the fucking phone. She stopped but did not turn around. She did not want to explain her sudden change in demeanor, nor was she too keen to go wandering through the streets of Hong Kong again. She froze, not knowing what to do.

Jude approached, but he stood to her side not wanting to impede her exit or force eye contact that she actively avoided.

“Daiyu, I... I’m not sure what to say. I do know that it has been a hell of a day and I have put way more on you today than anyone should have to endure and I am sorry for that. Would it be alright if I had my car take you home?”

To this Daiyu gave a quick nod, still not making eye contact with him. Jude then continued, “please think about it. I’m sorry to lay this burden on you, but honestly, I do not think we will be able to succeed without you. We need you.”

While still standing to her side, Jude stooped and cocked his head to come into the sight of her peripheral vision and said, “I’m very glad to have met you, Daiyu.” With that he turned and walked out of the lobby.

She walked out the front door and took a seat on a bench next to the valet station. In a few minutes a large black SUV pulled up. Other than confirming her name and her

destination, the driver spoke no word to her and left her to her thoughts alone in the back seat. As she stretched the seatbelt across her body, the lap belt shoved something hard against her. When she dislodged the item from her jacket pocket, she found it to be half a dozen pencils. She snapped each one vigorously and with the last gave a yell, one born out of exhaustion, despondency, and rage.

The next morning Daiyu stood in her kitchen wearing sneakers, running pants, and a light jacket. She recently resolved to become more active and thought that exercise would help lessen the impact of depression from the previous day's events. However, before she went out the door, her mother called to her. She could not find her glasses and coping with the near blindness in her left eye made searching for misplaced things much harder.

Daiyu found them sitting on the bedside table, perhaps a couple of inches away from where they were normally laid. She helped her mother out of bed and to the toilet. As the days of her infirmity lengthened, Daiyu saw the strain it put on her mother to burden her only child. As such, Daiyu normally did everything she could to keep the mood light and crack jokes (mostly in the form of vulgarities that would set her mom alight with indignation and correction). She could not bring herself to do that today and her mother sensed something was wrong.

Song Xiu was widowed at the age of twenty-three when her husband was killed in a car crash. Her daughter Daiyu was more precious to her than her own soul. She guarded her, protected her, educated her, and did everything she could to ensure that Daiyu would have every opportunity available particularly the ones that were denied to her.

Daiyu's grandmother told her mother constantly how much she spoiled Daiyu, yet she was the one who gave her far more allowances when no one was looking. But Xiu's sisters and friends all talked about her behind her back and pitied Daiyu for growing up without a father. They talked constantly about how foolish Xiu was to waste her youth by not trying to remarry. Xiu had no interest in doing so nor causing her child to suffer a man in her household that would undoubtedly stifle her unique talents.

For unique they were and far surpassing her peers. This fact too brought pity upon Daiyu from her family. The poor child had no comfort in anything other than books, which accounted for her unnatural fascination with them. Her aunts thought she would never marry because no man wanted to be with a woman who was smarter than he was, but Xiu and Daiyu could care less about their opinion.

The last six years had been particularly trying as Xiu dealt with a spate of tumors growing on all parts of her body. She faced them all with a fierce determination to survive, but one was now pressing its savage way next to her ocular nerve and it was here to stay. The condition took a tremendous physical toll on her. Although she had not yet reached the age of sixty, she looked to be in her eighties.

The tumor caused severe proptosis of her left eye. Daiyu never flinched a millimeter and always looked directly into both her eyes as if she were still looking into the same dark brown irises that were the source of all wisdom, joy, and confidence for her. But Xiu could

not look past the disfigurement her condition brought upon her. She could barely stand to look at her own reflection out of her one good eye. She was wizened and hideous on top of her constant agonizing pain and her will to survive was fading rapidly.

After getting her out of bed, Daiyu brought Xiu to sit in her husband's old reclining chair per the daily ritual. It had been his most prized acquisition after they got married and began to build a home. He died when Daiyu was three months old and Xiu's only memories of the two of them together were wrapped up in that chair. He would wake up with the baby in the middle of the night for a bottle feeding to let Xiu sleep and in the early hours of the morning, she would often find him with his feet up on the recliner and baby Daiyu sound asleep on his chest.

Despite the loving care she showed to it, this chair should have been thrown out years ago. As dingy as it was, Xiu cherished it now more than ever and it was one of her only comforts. As she sat there day after day, she noticed that it seemed to be getting larger and larger. At first, she thought her mind was playing tricks on her before she realized that she was diminishing physically as rapidly as she was emotionally.

Daiyu finished preparing her tea and sat it on a small tray in front of her. For the last few days, Xiu stopped eating breakfast and now barely touched her morning oatmeal. As such, Daiyu decided it was more important to get her to eat something rather than worrying about its nutritional value. In the winter months the pastry shop her mother was so fond of stopped carrying her favorite strawberry tarts, but the day before they came back into stock and Daiyu was excited to grab a few to surprise her mother with. Unfortunately, the exceedingly unpleasant events of the day before co-opted her plans to present them with last night's dessert. Daiyu decided that they could both use a treat so out they came with the morning tea.

As she laid the tray down in front of her mother, Daiyu developed a big smile in anticipation of her reaction. It struck her to the core when the scent caught Xiu's attention far before the sight of them did.

As her mother sniffed the air she said, "ah, I know what that is! Oh, Daiyu, these are my favorite. But strawberry tarts for breakfast? Are you trying to make me fat so you can steal my clothes?" She then smiled as she took a big bite.

"Damn, you're on to me," Daiyu said. "One way or the other those Jordache jeans will be mine old lady."

Just then there was a ring from the front doorbell. *Shit*, Daiyu thought. She left a message for the in-home nursing service late last night, but she was afraid it might not have reached the nurse who cared for her mother during the day in time. She was not looking forward to the awkward conversation where she would have to send her away, but money was sure to be tight for a while and she needed to save this expense.

As Daiyu opened the front door she started to say, "Mrs. Fang, I am very sorry. I thought the message would reach you, but..."

Then she stopped short. Standing on the front stoop were Eppie Li and Jude.

“Good morning Daiyu,” Eppie said with a quick smile and then proceeded to walk inside without being invited, but Jude stopped on the front stoop.

“I am sorry to come over unannounced Daiyu. Eppie thought...”

“Stop right there. ‘Eppie thought’ is all the explanation I need.” She managed a smile as she looked up at him.

Jude moved closer and looking deep into her eyes asked, “how are you?”

“I don’t know, Jude. I don’t know. Last night... last night was a lot.” She wanted to say more but did not really know what to say other than to invite him inside. As they walked in, Jude stopped her just inside the doorway.

“Daiyu, Eppie told me about your mother. May I meet her?” he asked.

“Of course, please,” Daiyu said and began walking to the living room. “She cannot see out of her left eye and her vision is failing in her right eye, but she can still hear a butterfly flap its wings in the wind, so you don’t have to raise your voice. Sorry. It’s just, often when people first meet my mom these days they assume she’s deaf too and they end up screaming at her.” Jude nodded and they continued.

As they walked into the living room, Eppie was sitting on the sofa next to Mrs. Song speaking in Cantonese. When she approached, Mrs. Song said to her daughter, “Daiyu, you didn’t tell me Eppie was coming over, but I knew it was her. I could tell by her perfume. She smells like a rose in the sunshine. You should ask her what she uses because you...” she stopped when she sensed an unknown presence in the room.

Jude walked over to her and knelt so that they were on the same eye level. Jude placed his hand on his breast and nodding slightly he said, “cho sen Song tai tai.”

Xiu was confused, but not frightened. Eppie then rose to come in front of her and kneeling as well said, “Xiu, this is my friend, Jude. He has come to help you. Is it alright if he gives you something that might help you feel a little better?”

Xiu was highly skeptical, knowing the nature of her condition, but not wanting to be rude, smiled and nodded appreciatively. Out of his jacket pocket Jude produced a slender metal cylinder about five centimeters long. He pressed a locking mechanism on the side and a small plunger extended from the bottom. As he started to speak, Daiyu started. Anticipating this reaction, Eppie rose and gently laid a hand on her arm.

“Wait, you’re giving her medication? No, hold on... I ought to...” she ceased her protest sensing that it was folly to stop someone who wanted to try to paint a burning house. All of this was very odd but Daiyu trusted Eppie implicitly and made no further effort to intercede.

“Daiyu, trust him,” Eppie said with quiet assurance. The word of her mentor was good enough for her and Daiyu watched silently, but with tremendous anxiety.

Jude then spoke to Xiu in Cantonese saying, “Mrs. Song, this is a spray that goes into your left nostril. It will not hurt. It will feel just like a nasal spray you may take for allergies. When I count down from three, I want you to take a deep breath through your nose for me.”

After she nodded, Jude inserted the device slightly into her left nostril and after counting three, depressed the actuator. He returned the device to his jacket pocket and waited for a moment. As he did so, Xiu took his left hand and held it tightly. Slowly, Jude then placed his right hand on the left side of her face. He closed his eyes and then his hand started to glow. The light grew until it seemed to fill up the entirety of the left side of Xiu's face.

She gave out a whimper and then gripped Jude's hand fiercely as her entire body quivered. Daiyu jumped reflexively in her mother's direction, but Eppie caught her. "Just hold on a moment," she said. "It's almost over."

Indeed, it was. At that moment the light faded and Xiu started to take slower, deeper breaths as Jude withdrew his hand. As they watched, her left eye receded into its correct place. Her spine straightened and she seemed to physically grow in front of them. Then it seemed the tension of the tremendous pain she had carried for so very long washed away with each breath. In a few moments the twenty years the cancer put on her body disappeared and the sight returned to her eyes.

She looked around the room as if she were waking from a horrible dream.

"Daiyu?" she asked the room.

"Mommy!" Daiyu cried and threw down her body and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist as she heaved with tears.

Xiu put her left hand on her daughter's head resting on her breast, but still held fast to Jude's hand with her right. She looked him in the eyes with wonder. Jude smiled at her and said, "hello Mrs. Song. It's nice to meet you properly." She returned his smile and then turned her attention to Daiyu.

For a long while they cried and talked and cried and talked. After a while Jude emerged from the kitchen carrying a teapot and fresh cups.

"I hope you don't mind Mrs. Song, but it looks like your tea has gone cold so I took the liberty," he said.

Mrs. Song jumped up and motioned for Jude to sit.

"Oh goodness, where are my manners? Please, Jude, sit. Now, I have some nice cakes in the kitchen and Daiyu got some of my favorite strawberry tarts from the bakery. Let me go see what I have." She then smoothed her shirt and started walking toward the kitchen.

"Mommy?!?" Daiyu cried after her in bewilderment.

Xiu stopped for a moment and looked back at her annoyed at the delay.

"Five minutes ago you were dying from brain cancer and now you want to serve tea?" Daiyu asked incredulously.

Xiu just waved at her dismissively and continued into the kitchen. When she returned with a tray full of all the treats she promised and more of course, they spoke for hours. Jude sat quietly on the periphery as they did. Xiu felt like she had been asleep for a year and wanted an update on everything, not only all the minute details of Daiyu and Eppie's lives, but a full update on the wide world at large.

After much time had passed, Jude stood and thanked Mrs. Song for the hospitality, but then said he unfortunately had to leave. After more tears and a deep embrace from Xiu, he took his leave and Daiyu followed after him almost instinctively. She stopped as she reached the threshold of the living room door, as did Jude.

Daiyu looked at her mother who said, “go on Daiyu. Go with him. I am fine now. Really, I am. Plus, Eppie is here with me until I get my wits about me again. Go now.”

Daiyu then embraced her mother tightly and as she pulled away to leave, her mother grabbed her arm. Xiu then wiped Daiyu’s tears away and started fixing wayward hairs and vigorously wiping a crumb away from the corner of her mouth. She straightened some wrinkles on Daiyu’s pullover and muttered something under her breath about wishing she was wearing something else. When she started to tug on Daiyu’s yoga pants, she had enough.

“Mommy!” Daiyu said sharply swatting her hand away and walked out the door.

They had been speaking for so long that a rain shower must have passed and Daiyu did not even notice. She recalled the morning sun being bright, but now it was overcast and there were fresh puddles on the ground. She followed Jude for half a block without saying a word. He had an oddly quick pace as if he was running late for something but she followed intently.

Finally, Daiyu had enough of the silence. “Okay, well that was more impressive than flying balls. Alright, out with it now, how did you do that?”

Jude chortled a little at her directness. No sentimental awe or enigmatic musings from Daiyu, the scientist wanted answers.

“The spray contained nano versions of the orbs you saw last night. Inside my body is a link to a central computer. The sensors in my hand acted as a sort of sonar to help target the tumor and the probes destroyed it. Then they did a general sweep of her body. You did not know it, but there was a tumor growing on her left kidney as well. They’re gone now and she will be okay.”

Daiyu continued to walk in silence now contemplating the mechanics of what had just been described to her but asking no more questions for the moment. After a while they came to an old, but grand temple. Daiyu had been instructed on its historical significance at some point in her childhood, but never paid attention to the lessons. Jude walked up the stone steps and past the red pillars through the front entrance without even pausing.

“Why are we *here*?” Daiyu asked.

“I need to show you something,” Jude replied.

As they continued through the temple’s main hall, Jude turned to a smaller alcove and paused before a small figure that was maybe twenty centimeters tall. A couple of sticks of incense still burned from recent visitors and there were still small tokens all around the idol.

“Kuan Yin,” Daiyu observed. “Okay, again, why have you brought me here?”

“Kuan Yin is merciful. For centuries people have sought her out, entreated her, begged her to deliver them from their suffering,” he replied.

“Fat load of good it did them,” Daiyu scoffed.

“Didn’t it? Well, probably not. But another way to look at it is, *you* are the promise of Kuan Yin fulfilled, Daiyu, and you’re not magic. You’re not going to wave your hands and take away the hurts of the world, but you can show them how to heal those hurts themselves. Be a part of this, Daiyu. I need you. Come with me.” With that he extended his hand. After a moment, Daiyu took it and she took it with a firm grip.

Jude then said, “it’s time for us to go.” Before Daiyu could ask any follow up questions, Jude produced a necklace and placed it around her neck. Just like Auri and Agnes, she held up the odd pendant wondering about the origin of the symbol. As she did so, an identical symbol lost in the gilded patterns at the base of the icon’s statute started to glow.

Jude then took her hand and placed his other hand directly on the symbol. As she watched, the light grew well beyond his hand quickly taking over her entire field of vision and they were gone.